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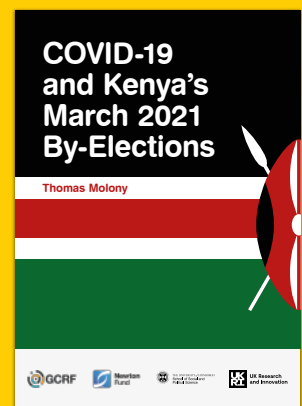
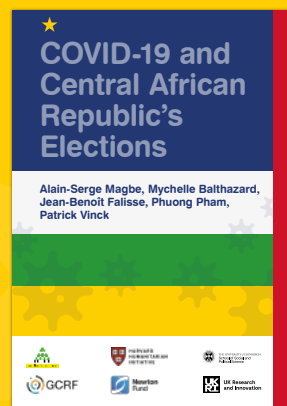
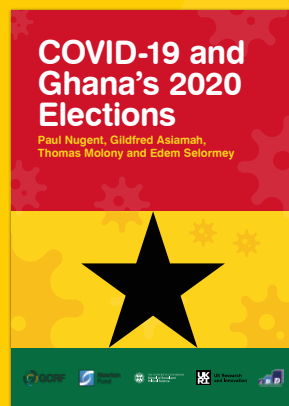
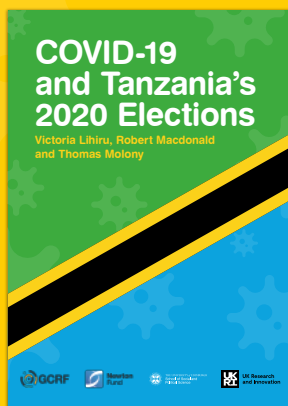
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Reducing the Transmission of COVID-19 during African Elections: technical considerations

Thomas Molony and Robert Macdonald



Introduction

Elections create a significant risk of increasing transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. At various stages of the electoral process, voters need to interact with officials, they may assemble in private and public spaces, and they may exchange objects such as electoral materials and documents. This potential for interactions and exposures to SARS-CoV-2 increases the risk of contamination among electoral officials, political actors, registered voters and all others they come into contact with.

Early in the pandemic, several sets of general recommendations to mitigate these risks were produced.¹ However, due to their timing, those recommendations were unable to draw on evidence from research conducted in the context of COVID-19. As a result, they have little to say about how successfully mitigation measures are implemented in practice. Furthermore, the early recommendations tend to propose universal solutions that do not always take into account the specific social and economic challenges of Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). For these reasons, the UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund 'African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic' project is designed to offer evidence-based, context-specific recommendations that are specifically tailored to making African elections safer. These recommendations may also prove valuable in improving the safety of elections in other LMICs.

The project is a collaboration between researchers from the University of Edinburgh, the Open University of Tanzania, the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (who work with the NGO Echelle). We followed each stage of three national elections that occurred towards the end of 2020: in Tanzania, Ghana, and the Central African Republic. This involved a convergent mixed-methods study design that included nationally representative population-based surveys on a range of COVID-19-related attitudes and experiences, observation of the electoral process, and qualitative interviews with government employees, political parties, civil society actors and Electoral Management Body (EMB) staff.

Elections have multiple stages, many of which take place well before the polls open. For this reason, the project followed all the stages of our case study elections, including voter registration, party nominations, campaigns, voter education, polling day, tallying, and the announcement of results. More recently, we have also conducted qualitative research during by-elections in Kenya.

In this short paper, we focus on 1) issues relating to the protocols themselves, 2) the compliance and enforcement of these protocols, and 3) voter education. We suggest improvements to the ways in which existing measures can be applied in practice, and we highlight the areas in which the risks of spreading SARS-CoV-2 have tended to be overlooked in the elections that we have been following. To read our country-specific working papers, please visit our project website: <https://aecp.sps.ed.ac.uk/>.

1. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/ifes-covid-19-briefing-series-safeguarding-health-and-elections>; <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-19-how-to-hold-elections-safely-democratically-during-pandemic/> & <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pandemic-polls>



A chaotic polling station with few COVID protocols being observed at Mamprobi Salaga, Ghana. The location is central Accra in the early morning (a time that voters tend to favour). The general elections had a turnout of 79%.

Considerations relating to COVID-19 Protocols

EMBs must draw up COVID-19 protocols explicitly based on Ministry of Health guidelines on COVID-19. In many countries, trust in health officials tends to be higher than that of officials working in other institutions.² Emphasising to voters that the protocols for COVID-19 mitigation during elections are based on Ministry of Health guidelines can heighten credibility and bolster confidence in the EMB message, and may therefore also increase voter adherence. If association with the Ministry of Health is deemed to be too political during the electoral period, advice can be adopted from other agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) or the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

COVID-19 electoral protocols must address the electoral process comprehensively and not be limited to the election day or specific aspects such as voter registration. Protocols must, for example, address safe engagement by political parties, voter education and the distribution of campaign and electoral materials.

COVID-19 recommendations need to be kept up to date. If, at any stage, new information or new recommendations result in changes to intended practices, these should be reflected in all relevant official documents, particularly those that outline the EMBs' COVID-19 protocols.

Preparation of COVID-19 protocols should be participatory in nature, involving key electoral actors. The protocols should be designed early, popularised and be applied consistently during every stage of the election.

We have observed that the extent to which measures are adhered to during campaigning can decline as the election draws closer. We have also seen that standards can slip in polling stations as election day progresses.

There is a need to **clarify the extent to which EMBs' COVID-19-related protocols are binding.** Specifically, clear guidelines are required as to the actions to be taken if they are violated. Key stakeholders in the elections should be consulted when determining the consequences for non-compliance with the protocols.

It is also important that **COVID-19 protocols are enforced evenly across the political spectrum.** Double standards, for example ignoring infractions by incumbent party politicians or electoral officials while punishing the opposition for engaging in the same practices, can result in weakened public trust in the measures.

2. IPSOS, 2019, 'Global trust in professions: Who do global citizens trust?', <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-09/global-trust-in-professions-ipsos-trustworthiness-index.pdf>.

Many of the materials required to implement COVID-19 protocols are quite simple, for example, buckets of water, soap, sanitizer, and protective masks and gloves for EMB staff. However, when they need to be distributed across a whole country, EMBs are likely to incur significant expenses. Further costs will be accrued if the number of polling stations is expanded or if additional staff are deemed necessary. In a context where EMBs are often running on tight budgets, **it is necessary to ensure that additional ringfenced funding is made available to facilitate the COVID-19 protocols.**

Considerations for compliance and enforcement of protocols

In those African countries in which the risk of COVID-19 has been taken seriously, many sensible measures designed to reduce the transmission of SARS-Cov-2 during elections have been introduced. These have included social distancing in polling stations, regulated distances for separating voters in queues, mandatory handwashing, requirements to wear masks, and, in some instances, the use of non-contact 'thermo-gun' thermometers. Although some vulnerabilities have remained, **most of the shortcomings that we have observed relate to the poor enforcement of existing measures**, and the non-adjustment of the election budget to cover COVID-19-related costs, rather than any technical deficiency in the protocols themselves. Steps need to be taken to better **ensure that elementary protocols are enforced more rigorously.**

In several elections, we have observed both voters and staff of EMBs being in close proximity to each other even when social distancing guidance is in place. It is important to **adhere to social distancing in queues and in polling stations/tally centres.**

There needs to be **more consideration of how social distancing in the polling station can actually be achieved.** There has often been a disconnect between the recommended polling station layout and the number of people who are permitted to be present in a polling station at one time. **The number of polling centres needs to be increased and the recommended polling station layout needs to accurately reflect social distancing protocols.** In particular, it should be ensured that the polling station layout illustration provides sufficient space for the maximum number of party agents who are allowed in the polling station at one time, while also maintaining the minimum social distancing. There also needs to be adequate space to allow election observers to operate, a consideration which is particularly important in countries where some domestic observers are tasked with remaining in a single polling station for the entire day, from long before opening until the count is complete.

Within polling centres, some of the polling stations are often much busier than others, which can lead to overcrowding. Polling centre officials should **distribute voters so that there is an even numerical spread by polling station.** When not done carefully, methods such as assigning voters to polling stations alphabetically can result in some stations being crowded while others are relatively quiet.

Mask wearing at polling stations has been inconsistently observed by voters, members of political parties and EMB staff. Oftentimes, people who are wearing masks do not have them fitted properly. Everyone at polling stations **should wear face masks so that they cover the nose and mouth.** Polling station staff should also be aware of the correct procedure if a voter who does not have a face mask still insists on voting. The EMBs should consider providing face masks to any voter who is unable to obtain one, as the uneven distribution of face masks could be politicised during the elections, which may create disturbances.

We have encountered some instances of EMB staff who are not sufficiently familiar with the functioning of the non-contact thermo-guns that they have been issued to check voters' temperatures. **The EMB staff who are using non-contact thermo-guns need to be well trained and know the precise temperature above which people are not permitted to access the polling station/tally centre.** If the non-contact thermo-guns have a colour coding light that signals temperatures within particular ranges (e.g. red for above the threshold, green/blue for below), then the EMB needs to check – *before issuing them* – that they are all programmed to the correct thresholds. The colour coding then needs to be explained to the clerk using the non-contact thermo-gun. EMB staff also need to **know the procedures if they come across a voter whose temperature is above the permitted threshold.** This is especially important in countries where the EMB has made a commitment that no voter will be disenfranchised.

EMB staff have often been issued protective gloves to wear when they handle electoral materials, but these have not been worn consistently. Staff should **wear protective gloves whenever they handle electoral materials**. This includes the pens that are used for marking ballots, because they are touched by every voter, and are therefore potential vectors of transmission. The same can be said for electronic voting/voter registration machines, where they are used, as they are also touched by every voter. In addition to this, **these items should be sanitised regularly**. It is important that this is done carefully, as some sanitizers can cause the electronic voting/voter registration machines to malfunction. This not only slows the electoral process, but also increases the number of people queuing to vote, thereby putting voters and polling staff at greater risk of contracting SARS-Cov-2. The compatibility of sanitizers with the electronic voting/voter registration machines must be ascertained before they are used for voting/voter registration. This knowledge can be obtained from the supplier, or after extensive trials. Clear instructions need to be given to polling staff about **when, how, and how often the electronic voting/voter registration machines are sanitized, and which sanitizer is compatible with the device**. The exact uses of sanitizer, and the precise location of sanitizer in the polling station, should be indicated in EMB documentation.

In terms of adherence to COVID-19 protocols at polling stations, the EMB 'entry clerk' (sometimes called the 'queuing clerk' or 'direction clerk') plays perhaps the most important role. They can be responsible for first meeting voters, ensuring that they wash their hands, checking that they are wearing their masks correctly, and making sure that their temperatures are checked. This is normally conducted by one EMB clerk in each polling station (although sometimes by one EMB clerk for each polling *centre*, depending on local arrangements). We have generally observed these clerks successfully ensuring that voters wear face masks, wash their hands, and have their temperatures checked. They could still do more to **ensure that face masks are worn correctly, and that social distancing is adhered to in the queue**. The importance of these measures should be emphasised to the entry clerks during their training. Where possible, the number of clerks should be increased to two so that adequate assistance is provided, including to people with special needs.

Given the duties of the entry/queuing clerk, their title is a misnomer. As shown above, they do far more than assist voters' entry to the polling place and/or marshal the queue. On election day, the entry/queuing clerks oversee the management of some of the most important COVID-19 protocols – especially those that are most visible to voters. It is recommended that the EMBs consider **a change from the title of 'Entry Clerk' or 'Queuing Clerk' to 'COVID Protocols Clerk' (CPC)**. The proposed new name for the clerk demonstrates to voters and polling station staff the centrality of COVID-19 mitigation measures in the electoral process. Having a named COVID Protocols Clerk also provides each polling station with an explicit and dedicated COVID-19 focal point, and allows the other polling station staff to concentrate on the day's electoral processes. The tasks that the COVID Protocols Clerk are responsible for need to be clearly designated, and their training needs to specifically address those tasks, in addition to their normal duties.

However, **the Presiding Officer should retain overall responsibility for the polling station and all staff in that polling station – including the COVID Protocols Clerk**. This means that although the COVID Protocols Clerk has their dedicated role, the Presiding Officer should still have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that supplies of all materials have been received, that they are in place before voting begins, and that they are sufficient for the entire day. If hand-washing materials are not delivered, for example, the Presiding Officer should ensure that soap and water are in place before voting begins.

Furthermore, even though there is one person assigned to act as COVID Protocols Clerk, **all polling staff should have ownership over and responsibility for adherence to the protocols in the polling station**.

As vaccine rollouts are beginning across many African countries, various methods for prioritising people are being put in place. In some countries, citizens considered to be 'frontline workers' will be given preferential access to vaccinations. Examples include healthcare workers, police officers, and teachers. Polling station staff are often drawn from these groups, but not always. **Countries in which frontline workers are prioritised for vaccination should consider adding all polling station staff to this category**.

Vote counts pose some specific challenges, particularly in those countries where there is a requirement that they be visible to the public. In these cases, crowding can occur, and COVID-19 guidelines can be forgotten. In places where instructing voters to go home after voting is not deemed to be viable due to the need to promote transparency, **measures need to be taken to ensure that citizens watching vote counts wear masks and observe social distancing.** If they are available at this stage, the COVID Protocols Clerk, with the assistance of polling station security officers, should be given responsibility for asking voters to observe these measures.

There may be other instances where polling staff require the polling station security officers to assist with issues relating to COVID-19 protocols. This should be the exception rather than the rule – it is not the job of the security officers to undertake the tasks (as outlined above) of the COVID Protocols Clerk, nor that of any other polling station staff. **The primary task of the polling station security officers is still to maintain peace in and around the polling station.** A focussed vigilance by the polling station security officers is required to avoid violent incidents that could lead to the effective abandonment of COVID-19 protocols altogether.

Unless political campaigns are banned outright, and for all political parties (including the incumbent party), then political parties will undoubtedly attempt to conduct rallies. There have been many rallies in the elections we have observed, and some of them have been very large gatherings of many thousands of people. COVID-19 protocols should acknowledge this reality. **The guidelines on political gatherings need to be crystal clear on specific crowd management protocols, and how they will be enforced.** They then need to be emphasised in the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and applied to all political parties. We have also frequently observed social distancing guidance being ignored during rallies and political meetings. **Political parties need to ensure that everyone adheres to social distancing during all political gatherings.** It is particularly important that the aspirants themselves [or 'the candidates themselves?'] adhere to the social distancing protocols, as it is harder to persuade the general public to follow guidance when they see political elites flouting it.

During voter registration, some EMBs have introduced **mobile phone technologies that enable members of the public to check the voter register.** As this allows citizens to avoid having to view publicly-posted lists – which can involve some crowding – these initiatives should be replicated elsewhere. However, they should not be relied upon to fully replace other methods, as some voters lack access to mobile phones or the requisite levels of ICT literacy to use the new services.

There needs to be a **greater focus on the issue of voter mobility.** During elections in some African countries, it is common for large numbers of voters, particularly those in major urban centres, to travel to their region of origin in order to vote. This travel tends to increase the number of people that voters will come in contact with and – because public transport is widely used – increases the likelihood of contracting or transmitting SARS-Cov-2. Furthermore, voter mobility carries the clear potential to increase the geographical spread of infections. Measures to mitigate these risks need to be introduced.

Considerations for Voter Education and Engagement

In order that voters take COVID-19 protocols seriously, and that they are better equipped to follow them, **general initiatives to educate the public about the pandemic need to be sustained.** Although Ministries of Health should lead on public health information campaigns, the reach of this messaging can be increased by involving other actors, including state and private media companies, religious leaders, and community and other civil society organisations that may be more attuned to local norms and practical needs. Better public understanding of how SARS-Cov-2 transmits, and the risks associated with contracting it, will give voters greater awareness of why COVID-19 protocols are introduced for elections and why it is important that they adhere to them. **It is important for public health practitioners to be involved in these efforts,** and for the adoption of best practices that promote behaviour change beyond top-down communication efforts.

It is also important that good **quality data on the pandemic is collected and continues to be disseminated during the elections.** Both the general public and policy makers should be kept abreast of the developing situation so that they can make informed decisions. The risk that COVID-19-related data is politicised is high, particularly during an election year. Therefore, we recommend that **institutions with independence from party politics take the lead on collecting and disseminating COVID-19-related data** where possible.

During the elections we have observed, voter education initiatives have not yet fully integrated COVID-19 protocols. Rather, voting procedures are still outlined without reference to the new measures that have been put in place. As a result, a good opportunity to explain new protocols is missed and there can be confusion when citizens experience additional stages in the voting process. Therefore, **public health messaging should be fully integrated into voter education initiatives.**

Given the potential politicization and misinformation around the pandemic, **voter engagement must include efforts to combat rumours and misinformation**, conveying an apolitical/neutral message.

Many EMBs produce a 'Voting Procedure' illustration to explain how the voting process works. The pre-pandemic voting procedure illustrations often included an outline of several numbered steps, usually depicting a voter entering the polling station and undergoing voter identification, then showing the subsequent steps through to voting and exiting the polling station. A straightforward intervention is for EMBs to **include the extra steps that relate to COVID-19 mitigation measures in the 'Voting Procedure' illustration.** The pandemic need not take centre stage in the illustration – the COVID-19 mitigation measures can merely be added to the existing pre-pandemic voting procedure guidance illustration. If this currently begins with '1: Identification of voter' in the polling station, the illustration could now be preceded by text and imagery indicating:

- 'Voter wears a face mask covering nose and mouth';
- 'Voter's temperature is checked';
- 'Voter washes hands';
- 'Voter waits in line', clearly indicating the required distance between people in the queue

(The AECP project has produced sample 'Voting procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic' illustrations. The illustrations offer ideas to electoral commissions on how they might design such an illustration in order to adapt their own pre-pandemic 'Voting procedure' illustrations for elections and referendums held during COVID-19.)

EMBs often have limited resources. Therefore, they need to **work closely with the public health authorities, political parties, and other actors** in order to expand their reach when educating the voting public on COVID-19 protocols.



An orderly polling station with all participants following COVID protocols at Musingini Primary School, Kenya. The location is rural Machakos in the late afternoon (a time that voters tend not to favour). The senatorial election had a turnout of 19%.

By-Elections, Referendums and Voter Registration Exercises

Elections are often understood as national general elections, and the focus is often implicitly on election day. The COVID-19 pandemic affects all manner of electoral activities where physical interaction occurs. For this reason, **the issues raised in this paper apply to national general elections, by-elections, referendums and voter registration exercises.**

Furthermore, **by-elections are an excellent opportunity for EMBs to learn.** If by-elections need to take place at this time, EMBs should use the opportunity to assess preparations and perhaps to run pilots. By doing so, these by-elections can provide valuable, country-specific lessons for future larger-scale, national elections.

Voter registration exercises also provide an opportunity to learn from experience prior to national polls. However, they are generally conducted at a national level, so **COVID-19 protocols should already be in place and enforced during voter registration.**

Considerations for Election Observation

Elections in Africa and elsewhere often take place in the context of fragile democratic transition and can be marred by election-related violence. While this paper has mainly considered how electoral bodies must design and implement safe elections from a public health perspective, some broader political implications cannot be ignored. As elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the socio-economic fabric of African countries, and this may fuel the risk of electoral violence. At the same time, governments should not use COVID-19 as a pretext to install anti-democratic surveillance and control measures that affect political parties and the public. In this context, the role of both domestic and international **election observation bodies must evolve to include considerations for how COVID-19 is transforming risks of electoral violence and anti-democratic measures.**

Due to travel restrictions, safety concerns, and financial constraints, the number of observers sent to African elections by international observation groups has been lower than usual since the start of the pandemic. This makes it even more crucial that **international groups and domestic groups work closely together.**

The authors will incorporate these issues into their research for an ESRC-funded project entitled 'Local Perceptions and Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa', which focuses in particular on the important role that domestic observation missions can play alongside international partners. They will publish their findings as soon as they become available.

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